

“Repent Your Way to a Merry Christmas”

Date: December 8, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Advent 2, Year A

Text: Matthew 3:1-12

Theme: Repentance; John the Baptist

Messages! They’re coming at us quick and furious. Text messages, emails, social media posts, commercials on television and radio. I even endure commercials at the pump when I’m putting gasoline in my car, at some fill-up stations. We are frequently reminded of how many days are left until Christmas, and we are encouraged to spend freely. “Hurry up! Get your discount and save even more money!”

Solicitations come in the mail to give to charities, with reminders of tax advantages as the year draws to a close. We get invitations to parties, and gatherings with family, friends and co-workers. Messages come to us in greeting cards from friends and relatives.

Some of them even have religious pictures and remind us of the reason for the season. But among all of those messages and encouragements and enticements, don’t miss the key message. John the Baptist draws attention to it. “*Repent* for the kingdom of Heaven is near!”

That’s an odd message for Christmas, isn’t it? Usually we expect something a little more joyful and happy. But repent? Someone once said, half-jokingly, “If we’re not careful, John the Baptist can take all the joy out of Christmas.” I disagree.

I think it is John’s message that puts the joy into Christmas. For it is his message that calls us not to the way Christmas is, but to the way Christmas ought to be. Christmas ought to be free from guilt, and free from self-absorption. And for that to occur there must be repentance.

John's message called people to repentance. However, one of the hallmarks of our present age is the absence of guilt. Not many people would deny that fact. Some are pleased that guilt has been dethroned; others see it as a bad sign.

But the absence of guilt in today's world makes it very difficult to talk about repentance. For if there are no feelings of guilt, then the need for repentance is greatly minimized, if not altogether eliminated. Why do we need a Savior to be born, if we have nothing to be saved from?

One man said he had been to many churches and heard several preachers say something like, "Don't try to impress God with your good works," or "Don't try to keep the rules and regulations to win your way into Heaven." He sarcastically thought to himself, "Who's trying anymore?"

For many, the word "repentance" is a word that belongs to another time period. What a quaint idea, to think that we need to tell God that we're sorry for being a bad little girl or boy.

On the other hand, some see repentance as something that we have to do only if we get caught. You say you're sorry so the consequences won't be so bad, and they'll go easy on you. No one, it seems, is ever truly sorry for doing the wrong thing. The only thing they seem sorry about is getting caught.

But repentance is far more than simply blurting out a quick "I'm sorry." Repentance is more than simply feeling bad about having done something wrong. In fact, repentance is not even making bold resolutions that we'll never participate in a certain conduct again. Those are nice, but not enough.

Instead, repentance means to turn around and to go in another direction. What John the Baptist wanted his audience to hear was this:

“Turn your life toward this one we call The Messiah. Turn away from your old life and turn your face towards Jesus. Seek Him, follow Him; strive to be like Him. Turn away from the old way of living and turn in a new direction, following the Lord.”

A lot of people think John the Baptist was a negative preacher. But *this* message of repentance is neither negative nor down-faced. Rather, it breaks the chains of oppression and death that hold us back. Jesus Christ was born to set us free.

He died to set us free from our sin. Repentance is the key to freedom. That’s not a negative thing; it’s a joyful thing to be free from sin. John the Baptist does not take the joy out of Christmas; he puts the joy back into Christmas. “Rejoice, Christ the Savior is born!”

The poet Shel Silverstein wrote a rather humorous poem called “Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would not Take the Garbage Out.” His poems were often put into book form for children to enjoy. Let me share it with you:

“Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout  
Would not take the garbage out!  
She’d scour the pots and scrape the pans,  
Candy the yams and spice the hams,  
And though her Daddy would scream and shout  
She simply would not take the garbage out.

And so it piled up to the ceilings:  
Coffee grounds, potato peelings,  
Brown bananas, rotten peas,  
Chunks of sour cottage cheese,  
It filled the can, it covered the floor,  
It cracked the window and blocked the door  
With bacon rinds and chicken bones,  
Drippy ends of ice cream cones  
Prune pits, peach pits, orange peel,  
Gloppy glumps of cold oatmeal,

Pizza crusts and withered greens,  
Soggy beans and tangerines,  
Crusts of black burned buttered toasts,  
Gristly bits of beefy roasts...

The garbage can rolled on down the hall,  
It raised the roof, it broke the wall. ..  
Greasy napkins, cookie crumbs,  
Globs of gooey bubble gum,  
Cellophane from green baloney,  
Rubbery blubbery macaroni,  
Peanut butter, caked and dry,  
Curdled milk and crusts of pie,  
Moldy melons, dried up mustard,  
Eggshells mixed with lemon custard,  
Cold French fries and rancid meat,  
Yellow lumps of cream of wheat.

At last the garbage reached so high  
That it finally touched the sky.  
And all the neighbors moved away,  
And none of her friends would come to play.  
And finally Sara Cynthia Sylvia Stout  
Said, "Ok, I'll take the garbage out!"

But then, of course, it was too late...  
The garbage reached across the state,  
From New York to the Golden Gate.  
And there in the garbage she did hate,  
Poor Sarah met an awful fate,  
That I cannot now relate  
Because the hour is too late.  
But children, remember Sarah Stout  
And always take the garbage out."

Why do I share that poem with you today? – Because we are all like Sara Cynthia Sylvia Stout. We have not taken the garbage out. We keep our sins. As wretched as they may be, we will not get them out. The

garbage of our sin stinks up our lives. John the Baptist is our reminder. Repent! And let Christ take the trash out of your life. Make straight paths for Him! Flee from the wrath to come! Produce fruit!

Among the things we must do to prepare for Christmas, is repent! Repent your way to a Merry Christmas. Dear friends, I want you to know Christmas joy, real Christmas joy. Not the phony stuff that Amazon is trying to sell you online, but the real joy that comes from knowing Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

Put Christ back into Christmas by drawing near to Him. Confess your sin, turn away from the old and turn towards the new, the new life which Jesus offers. Repent your way to a Merry Christmas. Amen? Amen!